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TAGS: PHUM PGOV NU CASC PPTS  
SUBJECT: MISKITO INDEPENDENCE: DEATH & MAYHEM IN BILWI PROTESTS

REF: MANAGUA 501; MANAGUA 415

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert J. Callahan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Protestors who support the six-month-old independence declaration by Rev. Hector Williams, the "Wihta Tara" (or "Great Judge" in Miskito) of the Miskito Council of Elders (see REF A & B) have been brutally attacked by police, the Navy and government-run Citizen Power Council (CPC) youth gangs in the Puerto Cabezas municipality of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) according to multiple accounts from eyewitnesses, demonstrators, and media. Confrontations against separatists began on October 17 and culminated in full-scale violence on October 19. At its height, the police and CPC gangs worked in tandem to stop the protest, which led to the death of one man and the wounding of many others. On October 20, President Ortega declared that foreign embassy officials and NGOs were behind the protest; it was the first time Ortega had made any public comments regarding the six-month-old conflict. The violence marks another chapter in the ongoing conflict between the Atlantic Coast and central government. END SUMMARY.

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NICARAGUAN NAVY BOAT HITS CIVILIAN LAUNCH  
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2. (C) Since September, Reverend Hector Williams, the elected Wihta Tara (Miskito language for "great judge") and leader of the Miskito separatist movement, has called on supporters to join him in a peaceful demonstration to take over the RAAN Regional Government offices in Bilwi on October 19, the six-month anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Mosquito Coast (see REF A & B). Supporters from outlying communities began leaving their villages on Saturday, October 17 to arrive in Bilwi. One group of approximately 40 Miskito supporters left the Sandy Bay area at 7:00 a.m., traveling in three panga boats. The group was intercepted by a Nicaraguan Navy anti-narcotic craft, which rammed one of the panga boats, capsizing it and sending the passengers into the water. Silver Fredrick, a 16-year-old passenger, was struck by the navy craft's propeller, which severely lacerated his back and abdomen. The Nicaraguan Navy claimed that the panga boat passengers were involved in illicit drug activities; however, the victims and our contacts claim that the Navy was sent by regional leaders to prevent them from joining the protest in Bilwi.

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HEAVY RAINS THWART EARLY PROTESTS  
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3. (C) On October 18, a large group of over 500 separatists braved inclement weather and joined the Wihta Tara on an initial march to the RAAN

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POLICE-DIRECTED MOB VIOLENCE  
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4. (C) According to multiple accounts, from eyewitnesses, demonstrators and media, on October 19, anti-riot police and CPC-led youth gangs bru

5. (C) Eyewitnesses report that when the marchers reached the first police barrier outside the RAAN Regional Government buildings the CPC-led youth gangs, standing behind police lines, assaulted the independence protesters with a volley of stones and morteros (a type of firebomb). At the same time, the NNP provided cover for the CPC-led youth gangs by shooting tear gas grenades and rubber bullets into the group of protesters while blatantly ignoring the violence CPC militants used to start the confrontation. The NNP and CPC gangs eventually dispersed the crowd and chased marchers off the streets. Many marchers sought refuge in the Council of Elders' headquarters, but this was also assaulted with tear gas grenades and rubber bullets. Throughout the afternoon NNP anti-riot police indiscriminately shot tear gas grenades into private homes. At least 50 people have been hospitalized and between five and nine arrested, but little information exists on the extent of injuries or the charges to be filed.

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ONE DEATH  
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6. (C) The media have confirmed that at least one protester was killed in the confrontation. According to the two major daily newspapers and our sources, Ormes Warman Mens, a 68-year-old Miskito elder, suffered either a heart attack or stroke brought on by the police's use of tear gas to put down the demonstration. His death occurred as he attempted to flee the mob attack. Some people attempted to keep the man alive through CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but they were unable to continue their efforts very long because of the continuous bombardment of tear gas and rocks coming from the police and CPCs.

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MEDIA BLACKOUT  
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17. (C) A consular warden in the Bilwi area confirmed these reports and said that he could hear gunfire and tear gas grenades going off throughout the day around the city. He claimed that he had a video of the police and the CPC gangs working hand-in-hand to suppress the protest. Furthermore, the warden told us that the opposition radio stations were shut down during the afternoon of October 19. The only news outlets broadcasting were the government-controlled television station and FSLN and Yatama (a pro-government, indigenous political party) radio stations, which, according to local reports, were broadcasting inaccurate information about the basic facts of the protest and subsequent police repression.

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MORE ATTACKS AND ARRESTS - WIHTA TARA BACKS DOWN  
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18. (C) On October 20, our contacts and the media reported that anti-riot police laid siege to the Council of Elders' Bilwi offices where the Wihta Tara and at least 80 of his supporters were barricaded. Police closed off access to the street, then launched tear gas grenades at the building, and finally detained 30 supporters to prevent further protests. Heavy rains also inhibited protestor gathering. On afternoon of October 21, the Wihta Tara, speaking on Radio VECA, called on his supporters to return to their villages and end their protests for now.

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ORTEGA'S BLAMES FOREIGN EMBASSY OFFICIALS  
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19. (C) During a speech on October 20, President Ortega referred to the conflict in Bilwi. Without specifically mentioning either the independence movement or the Wihta Tara, Ortega declared that the conflict in Bilwi was about regional elections and blamed Embassy officials and NGOs for fomenting the crisis. "We will have elections in the month of April in the RAAN and RAAS and there are already those wanting to boycott these elections; they are promoting disruptions, promoting violence, above all in Bilwi...But, who are those encouraging this attitude of violence? The oligarchs, the traitors, accompanied by officials of some embassies and some NGOs, are trying to sow the seeds of discord. We know who they are."

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COMMENT  
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110. (C) The six-month anniversary of the Mosquito Coast independence declaration failed to advance the separatists agenda or the creation of a dialogue with the government. It was to be expected that the GON would try to stop the takeover of public buildings. But the police-sanctioned mob violence against demonstrated the government's willingness to resort to vigilante justice at the expense of basic political rights and the freedom of assembly of its citizens, and the ever increasing politicization of the Nicaraguan National Police. Post believes that Ortega's veiled threat against foreign embassies and NGOs were specifically directed against the United States Embassy and our democracy programs in the RAAN and RAAS run by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).  
CALLAHAN